

Introductory Statement for Elizabeth Prodromou

USCIRF/Wilson Center Event on Turkey

February 26, 2007

Thank you, Felice. As Felice mentioned, a delegation of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom traveled to Turkey in November 2006, visiting Ankara and Istanbul. The delegation consisted of Felice Gaer, myself, and three other Commissioners. The Commission met with Turkish government officials from the Foreign Ministry, the Diyanet, or Religious Affairs Directorate, including Mr. Ali Bardakoğlu, the head of the Diyanet, the General Directorate for Foundations or Vakıflar, and the Ministry of Education, as well as several members of Turkey's Parliament and others representing a variety of political parties. In addition to meeting with representatives from a wide range of Turkey's religious communities, the delegation also met with academics, journalists, legal advocates, members of the business community, and representatives of human rights organizations.

The overall purpose of the visit was to learn more about conditions of religious freedom and related human rights in Turkey. As the Commission has not heretofore reported on Turkey, the trip was a fact-finding visit that enabled the Commission to examine religious freedom conditions as well as learn more about the relationship between religion and the state and the ways in which religious freedom is protected and respected in Turkey. During its meetings, the Commission also looked into the wider issues that affect religious freedom, including the country's policy of secularism, Turkish politics and political development, law, history, nationalism, and the European Union accession project, among other topics.

The Commission went to Turkey in part to gain more information about reports of a number of religious freedom problems that currently exist in Turkey, both for the majority Muslim community as well as for all of the religious minorities, including the Lausanne minorities (Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Jews) as well as Alevi, Protestant Christians, and

others. With regard to Muslims, we had heard about restraints on their ability to manifest their religious beliefs in public spaces; for religious minority communities, we had heard about state actions that effectively prevent them from maintaining themselves, denying them the right to own property as a community; to sell and transfer property; to maintain that property; and to train religious clergy. We heard about domestic debates regarding the legal and educational reform measures necessary to address these limitations, and we also had heard about the ways in which the legislative reform packages generated by the EU accession project have addressed some of these concerns, with varying degrees of success.

During the Commission's visit to Turkey, we met with representatives of TESEV to hear the views of Turkey's journalist and academic community about a number of the issues I have described. In actual fact, I met with Mr. Mahcupyan at one point on our trip in his capacity as a columnist for Zaman, and Felice met with Mr. Paker at a later time during the visit. At these meetings, the Commission delegation heard about TESEV's recent poll of Turkish attitudes toward a wide-range of topics involving religion and politics in Turkey and received a preliminary report on their findings. The TESEV study is a useful effort at systematic understanding of the views of citizens-including academics, journalists, and members of the private sector-regarding state policies on religion and religious practice. Indeed, we were struck throughout our visit to Turkey by the extent to which these issues are matters of public debate.

When we met with Mr. Paker in Turkey, we discussed then the possibility of continuing our conversation during his impending visit to Washington. We also thought it would be useful to us-and to others in Washington's policy and academic communities-to offer Mr. Paker and his organization an opportunity to more fully present and discuss their poll findings. I should say at this point that, as a U.S. government agency, the Commission in no way endorses TESEV's findings or conclusions, but rather, we view this information-and our discussion here today-as useful in providing the necessary context for us as we formulate our own findings and conclusions from our visit.

Since our visit to Turkey, two events in particular have occurred that should be mentioned. In December 2006, the EU decided to slow or suspend a number of its "chapters" of negotiations with Turkey on its membership bid, leaving a question mark on the EU accession process-and on the future of Turkey's democratic reform project. In February 2007, Hrant Dink, a noted and respected Turkish journalist of Armenian descent who I'm sure was a friend to many in this room, was murdered outside his office by a Turkish nationalist, bringing to the forefront the critical problem Turkey still faces in coping with nationalist extremism in its midst. Both of these developments play a role in shaping the context of our discussion of these issues.

I will not turn the floor over to the moderator of today's event, Dr. Henri Barkey...